



Scotland native Jordon Benzie (pictured here with his girlfriend Tania Jensen at Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh) traveled from the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow earlier this summer to take part in the Department of Chemistry's NSF-REU Summer Research Program. (Courtesy Jordon Benzie.)

# COMMON GROUND: Scottish Student Finds Chemical, Cultural Connections in Aggieland

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— Jordon Benzie, Summer REU Program participant

Article

COLLEGE STATION --

Imagine your only exposure to Texas culture being cartoons and movies -- specifically, westerns populated with thick-drawled, larger-than-life cowboys equipped with requisite six-shooters and the egos to match their 10-gallon hats.

Now imagine Jordon Benzie's surprise when he arrived this summer in the Lone Star State, fresh from his native Scotland and eager to embark on a 10-week stint as a member of the **Texas A&M University Department of Chemistry's National Science Foundation-funded Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) Program.**

Since the moment Benzie found out he had been accepted into the prestigious program, he says he wondered how well he might fit in. Those concerns, however, soon evaporated like the area humidity the moment he stepped through the door of the Reed McDonald Building and into the similarly comfortable confines of his new campus and overall community.

"What surprised me most was how relaxed and friendly people are," Benzie said. "Even though I'd done my research into Texas A&M, lots of strangers greeting you with 'Howdy' was still unexpected."



**Summer Abroad**

Texas A&M chemistry professor Dr. Janet Bluemel and REU student Jordon Benzie observe the adsorption properties of a sample of silicon dioxide. (Credit: Kyle J. Cluff.)

While the customs and quirks of Aggieland admittedly took some getting used to, Benzie, a junior chemistry major at the University of Strathclyde, says he felt right at home in Texas A&M chemistry professor **Dr. Janet Bluemel's laboratory**. For the next eight weeks, Benzie worked collaboratively with Bluemel and her graduate student Kyle Cluff as he researched the adsorption properties of metal complexes on silica surfaces for his individual REU project.

"His enthusiasm made him stand out of the crowd right from the beginning," Bluemel said. "I knew from the first discussion about his project that he was here to take full advantage of this opportunity."

REU programs are grant-based summer courses funded by the NSF and hosted by universities across the nation to enhance undergraduate participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) research. These programs enable students like Benzie to participate in real-world scientific investigations under the guidance of a faculty mentor and to receive both a stipend and housing for the duration of the program.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the REU program and getting to use the modern facilities to conduct my research," Benzie said. "To come to the states for the first time and do research -- this was a huge opportunity for me. You have a lot of autonomy to do things on your own, which can be a real confidence-booster."

Benzie's visit wasn't all work and no play. In order to get the complete Lone Star State experience, he and his REU cohorts took in nearby cities and landmarks on off days, from a Fourth of July celebration in Austin to a visit to Blue Bell Creameries in Brenham.

"[Lyndon B.] Johnson Space Center was probably my favorite thing to visit," Benzie said. "I've been a massive sci-fi fan since I was a kid and had a huge obsession with the Apollo missions from the '60s and '70s. I was just in awe of the Saturn V rocket they had on display."

A native of Aberdeen in Northeast Scotland, Benzie grew up with a natural propensity for chemistry and recalls frequently reading the backsides of packages in order to learn the composition behind their contents. He says it was a high school chemistry teacher with a particularly engaging style of instruction who piqued his interest in the subject and ultimately inspired him to pursue it in college.

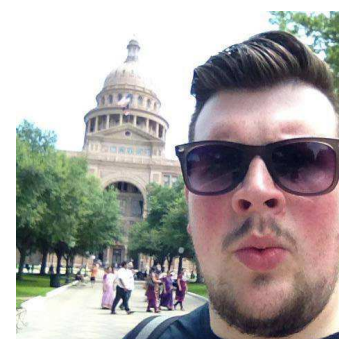
Hoping one day to forge a career in industrial research, Benzie says his main focus of the moment is to complete his education. One year shy of completing his master's of science in applied chemistry and chemical engineering, he already has his sights set on graduate programs, including those at Texas A&M.

Texas may be on the opposite end of the cultural spectrum from his native Scotland, but Benzie says he would have no qualms about returning. He loves the campus ("it's just so beautiful"), and he keeps in touch with a many of the people he met in his REU program ("it was the friendships I formed that I enjoyed most").

Besides, there would be at least a couple reminders of home.



*Benzie (far left), chilling in the Memorial Student Center Flag Room with some of his REU buddies. (Courtesy Jordon Benzie.)*



*While in Texas, Benzie took in several Lone Star State landmarks, including the State Capitol in Austin (above) and the George W. Bush Presidential Library (below) in Dallas. (Courtesy Jordon Benzie.)*



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"If anything is similar, it's the McDonalds and Starbucks," Benzie said.

To learn more about the Department of Chemistry NSF-REU Summer Research Program, visit <http://www.chem.tamu.edu/research/undergraduate/>.

For additional information about other REU programs available through the College of Science, go to <http://www.science.tamu.edu/research/undergraduate/reu.php> .

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